

German teachers and pre-school workers stage protest strike

Our reporter
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Strikes took place in several German states by teachers and preschool workers last Tuesday, March 3. The action was called by the Education and Teaching trade union (GEW).

Contract bargaining negotiations for public services in the states concluded in Potsdam last Friday without an agreement. The trade union's main demands were a wage increase of 5.5 percent or at least €175 per month, an end to temporary employment and no reduction in care for the elderly funded by employers. The public sector employers refused to make an offer and declared that the demands were “far removed from reality.”

The warning strikes were centred in Berlin, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony Anhalt and Bremen. The main action was in Berlin, involving over 400 schools, including vocational schools; primary schools; schools with a special pedagogical focus; the Lette association, an institution for the training of education professionals; and the Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus, a centre providing care and support to children and youth and training for social services professionals.

In Lower Saxony, social pedagogy practitioners were on strike alongside teachers. Around 50 schools in and around Hanover and other cities took part. In Saxony-Anhalt, strikes took place in Halle and Wanzleben. Trade union spokespersons announced a nationwide day of action for this week.

In Berlin, several hundred teachers and preschool workers gathered in the morning at Dorothea Schlegel Platz close to the Friedrichstrasse railway station to draw attention to the intense workload in schools.

The contrast between the bland phrases of the trade union bureaucrats of GEW and Verdi, who called out for several minutes, “We are heroes and we are the good ones!” and the combative but also exasperated remarks of many demonstrators was very evident.

There is deep mistrust of the trade union leadership, which two years ago abandoned the central demand of equal pay for equal work. In March 2013, GEW negotiators agreed a deal with the public sector state employers that excluded the key demand of a regulated and reasonable wage for teachers.

Conditions in many schools have worsened sharply as a result of this sell-out. In addition there are the austerity measures from the states and municipalities, which are imposing cuts in the education system with devastating consequences due to the state regulated limit on any new budget deficits.

Teachers and preschool workers, who perform an extraordinarily important service to society with considerable personal commitment, were bought off with miserly offers and deceived by state authorities.

They have to put up with unjust and unequal pay, and an increasing burden of work. By contrast, managers and politicians rake in millions when they ruin companies or drive projects to the wall. In many areas, social pedagogy practitioners struggle to provide children with a good start in life in the face of difficult conditions. But the politicians continually throw hurdles in their way by imposing more cuts.

“We are short of everything, sometimes we don’t even have paper to work with our pupils,” said Kathrin, who took part in the rally with her colleagues. This time, she said, a reasonable wage increase had to be achieved, and the constant attacks on care for the elderly could no longer be tolerated.

“Divisions take place at all levels. Here in Berlin, we receive less than in other states, and then there is still a difference between East and West Berlin. Even today, after 25 years! One has to remember that.”

Many demonstrators pointed out that there had been no real wage increase for years, while prices had risen

and the amount of work had constantly increased.

Meike came to Berlin two years ago. She explained the daily tensions in the schools produced by the different standards for employees and other professionals. While Berlin's Senate was reducing the number of certified teachers, there were always students who, after taking their exams in Berlin, were prepared to work as professional tutors in Berlin schools after working several years in Brandenburg or another state. These conditions led to repeated conflicts, because these professionals were often reluctant to participate in important initiatives or changes.

Torsten carried a sign with the slogan, "Equal pay for equal work." He said, "Yes, it's a very old demand, but it is yet to be enforced. It appears as if the wage differences are actually increasing. I think this is wrong and unfair." He also noted that it was horrifying that 25 years after reunification, different wages and pensions were paid in the east and west. "Our politicians speak a lot about unity, but they do exactly the opposite with wages."

The warning strike is a reminder of the struggle conducted two years ago and the lessons of that struggle are very important for the current strike. The WSWS drew the lessons at the time in a statement headlined "Teachers confront political questions."

We wrote at the time, "The attacks on teachers and the entire education system are part of a social decline that characterises capitalism today. Fundamental rights like the right to education and the right to a decent and secure job can no longer be reconciled with the existence of this social order.

"Since the trade unions have long since become part of this social order, they offer no resistance. Their officials live by confining and diverting the opposition of workers. Protests and strikes become purely symbolic rituals, or serve as a cover behind which a further deterioration of conditions is agreed."



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